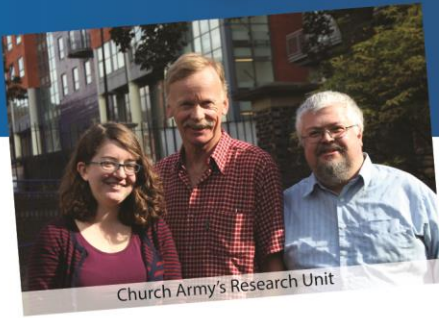


snapshots

stories from the edge

by Church Army's Research Unit



Issue 3: Church plants and fresh expressions of Church – how do these terms best relate?

by George Lings –
Director of Church Army's
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Some snapshots of an ongoing debate

Church Army's Research Unit throughout its quantitative research since 2011 has assumed the view, for various reasons, that fresh expressions of Church is the wider generic term and we have treated church plants as a valuable and an honourable model, but a subset¹, within a longer list of ways in which a further church can be started through missional engagement.

I aim to show that the question matters because I suspect we are already entering a paradigm shift of language and of thought. It is always tough when prior language and thinking begins to show its age and I think this is becoming true about the term "church planting". This view is bound to be resisted and the upstart newcomer had better show some grace and humility in suggesting there are better ways to describe what is overtaking it, which is the shift to the interpersonal paradigm of church and beyond the horticultural one (thinking of churches as people rather than plant life).

I am convinced that how we casually talk about things, especially if this uses images, is of great significance; it profoundly affects how we think about them. What we think then affects the

¹ As does G. Cray (ed.) *Mission-shaped Church* (London: CHP, 2004) p. 32.

value we place on them, and even the resources we invest in them.

An invidious secular example is the phrase "the bottom line", a phrase used by those who want to argue that the economics of a particular context should be the final argument. So language has power claims which is why it matters and this is not just an academic question.

Consider the limits of planting language. If some flourish, some wilt and some die you can shrug your shoulders and sow some more. They can be merely ornamental and if one dies you just buy another from B&Q. They can be scythed down at harvest time with little thought. Is this how we want to talk about churches? If a child is born it is a momentous moment in a family. It is also the ushering in of a future which is unknown but of great potential. Should a child die it is regarded as tragedy. Which of these sets of ways of talking is more appropriate about new churches?

I am convinced that how we casually talk about things, especially if this uses images, profoundly affects how we think about them.

This view that church plants are a subset of fresh expressions of Church, and that its horticultural language needs to be overtaken by the interpersonal paradigm of Church, is not universally shared. So this issue of *Snapshots* explores the two views.

The priority of church planting language

In the Church of England, the Diocese of London is unusual in giving church planting a high profile within its overall mission accomplishments. This stems back to the enduring fruitful partnership between the diocese and Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) and the succession of church plants from HTB beginning with St Barnabas Kensington in 1983, and which has continued and increased ever since.² Other large London churches, like St Helen's Bishopsgate, have latterly also followed suit. In addition, HTB was usually the venue for national Anglican church planting conferences which were held by the informal network of planters from 1987 to 2007.

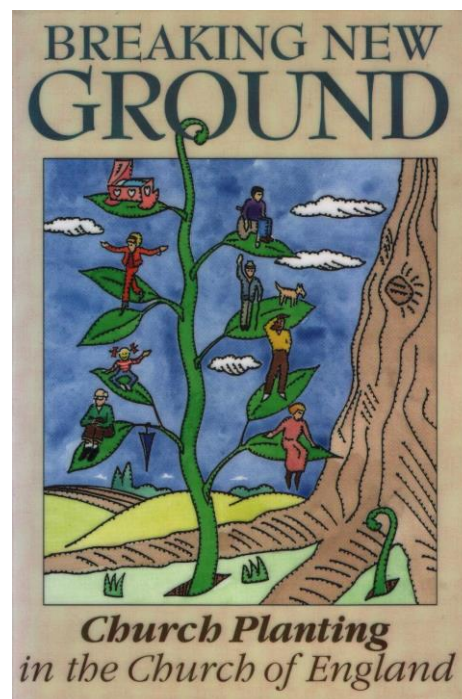
Thus the language of "planting" has three decades of history within current memory and in particular the consciousness of leading London players. The utility of the term is further advanced by its having a very wide international and ecumenical use, from first world to two-thirds world.

In a similar period, back in 1984, *How to Plant Churches*, the first English book on church planting, came out as the write-up of seven addresses at a 1983 conference held by the British Church Growth Association with the Evangelical Fellowship for Missionary Studies. It began by admitting that planting was a "complex and controversial subject"³ in that it had been hitherto assumed only to be needed on "the foreign mission field". The chapters express both the hopes and fears involved. The 1984 book was the first to open this field to the local church English reader.

Those fears, such as of unprincipled invasion of parishes and unfair competition for members, were still in evidence behind the writing of the *Breaking New Ground* report which came out in 1994 holding that church planting had a supplementary role in relation to the parish. The cover picture is primarily horticultural and illustrates that viewpoint that planting is ancillary – a small young plant growing up beside a larger ancient tree, and sadly in its shadow.

² Church Army's Research Unit tracked the first two decades of this work in *Encounters on the Edge* No. 15 *Dynasty or Diversity: The HTB family of Churches* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2002). We understand that the network now includes 33 churches, across several dioceses, from Lincoln to Chichester.

³ M. Hill, *How to Plant Churches* (London: MARC Europe, 1984), p. 7



With such a start 30 years ago, when the vocabulary of church planting was the only one in currency, it is fully understandable why the language took root and is still used today. It is then of interest that re-reading the editor Monica Hill's preface and her biblical introduction to the book reveals that both also contain the phrase a "new expression".⁴

The beginning of a challenge to go beyond planting language

It is also a matter of history that in 2002-03 the writing group behind *Mission-shaped Church* wrestled with a variety of terms for what they were tasked to describe and evaluate. Planting was one term, as were deliberate alternatives that had arisen since 1994 like "new forms of church" and "emerging church". Both of the latter arose from streams of thought that observed that church planting in those days assumed too much about what the resultant planted church would look like.⁵

Horticultural metaphors like runners, seeds and transplants themselves underlined such thinking. Strawberry runners create further strawberry plants, parsnip seeds grow parsnips; transplants by definition were of an existing type of plant. In fairness, the remaining term graft was explicit in validating the influence of combining the stock plant and the introduced graft which could vary the result. Yet these horticultural analogies were valuable in several ways: they stressed the

⁴ Hill, *How to Plant Churches*, pp. 9 and 19.

⁵ G. Cray, *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 31.

organic nature of the Church, by contrast to either a prior institutional or managerial view, and they valuably embodied the desirable reality of the multiplication of the number of churches, as opposed to numerical addition to existing congregations that had been more associated with the Church Growth School.

Despite the gains it brought, at a national level the term planting was thought to carry some freight. Both diocesan officials and other parish clergy were aware, in some situations, of a sense of being invaded by the planting venture, and of these large bodies attracting existing Christians away from their local churches, amounting to unhelpful transfer growth. Here the point is not to adjudicate on those charges but to note they were around and that a search for different language had some impetus.

Mission-shaped Church decided to coin the generic term “fresh expressions of Church”, describing “traditional church plants” as one of “a number of ways in which ‘church’ is being expressed.”

More positively the writing group were also very aware that since *Breaking New Ground* the variety across what had been begun simply did not fit within the prior practice of church planting, even allowing for variance between runners, grafts, transplants and seeds. On reflection it was argued that these earlier terms were not so much models of planting, but descriptors of ecclesial partnerships with either the sending parish or one entered into, in order to begin the new young church.⁶

This was the context of the search for a generic term that would honour the best of the past and yet hold together the diversity that seemed to have grown beyond it. Hence *Mission-shaped Church* evaluated past competing vocabularies and decided to coin the generic term “fresh expressions of Church”⁷, describing “traditional church plants” as one of “a number of ways in which ‘church’ is being expressed.”⁸ It is uncertain who first used this term. At the time those in the writing group were given to understand it was starting to be used by

⁶ Cray, *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. 112-116 uses that understanding.

⁷ Cray, *Mission-shaped Church*, pp. 33-34.

⁸ Cray, *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 43 and pp. 71-73.

Archbishop Rowan. Later it was found in the earlier writings of Gerald Arbuckle SM:

“So enormous is the task and the risks involved that no longer is the phrase ‘the renewal of the church’ adequate to convey the immensity of the challenge facing us. A fresh expression is necessary. Hence I speak of *refounding* the Church.”⁹

Since then the *Mission-shaped Church* report has travelled well across ecclesial traditions in England, to a number of European national churches and to various Commonwealth countries from Canada to New Zealand. In these cases the understanding has been that the generic term is fresh expressions of Church and church plants are one valued subset within it.

However, there are those in the church planting world who view the relationship the other way around and wish to maintain the taxonomic hegemony (my words are better than your words) of church planting. This is expressed through a view that church planting is the more adventurous in its crossing of necessary boundaries and that fresh expressions of Church are simply what all parishes do. It is also argued from the presence of horticultural images in Scripture, not least by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 3. This is buttressed by church planting being used across the worldwide church and it has length of English ecumenical usage. Moreover, the English Anglican story shows there is no doubt that it is historically fair to dub fresh expressions of Church as a “son of church planting” and in that sense historically derived from it.

A case to make fresh expressions of Church the generic term

Those in favour of fresh expressions of Church being the better generic term advance a case made up of a number of strands.

1. Language chosen shapes how something is viewed and valued.

Both sides would agree that there is no doubt that what is begun, by planting churches or seeing fresh expressions of Church being born, is not vegetables or trees, but human interpersonal communities. Why not then use images and

⁹ Gerald. A. Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), p. 4, his italics.

vocabulary that reflect this? This view argues we should move on from the predominance of horticultural images to the use of interpersonal ones, because the former do not describe adequately what is occurring and indeed fall short of expressing what these new churches are. Calling them plants has the real danger that the new young churches may be undervalued and seen as interesting missional experiments in the diocesan garden, fitting with the carefree saying “let 1,000 flowers bloom”, rather than being seen as young ecclesial children of the diocesan family.

This insight about more appropriate use of language about the church is not novel. The Catholic ecclesologist Avery Dulles SJ, in reference to horticultural gospel parables and what they positively indicate about the church, remarked long ago:

“These botanical models, however, have obvious limits, since they evidently fail to account for the distinctively interpersonal and historical phenomena characteristic of the church as a human community that perdures through the generations.”¹⁰

The language of fresh expressions of Church does not fall into that trap. Dulles' word “perdure” is uncommon, for which the Oxford Dictionary gives the following meanings: “permanent, eternal, durable”. Dulles himself goes on to commend the choice of societal models.

2. The horticultural analogy of church plants is weak in explaining an essential part of the process of beginning further churches.

This is a limitation. Seeds only produce the plant of that seed. This analogy cannot easily explain the diversity that necessarily arises when a further church comes to exist in a new context. The language of fresh expressions of Church, by the use of the word “fresh”, begins to hint at it, but the unique identity of each new young church is best undergirded by an understanding of an aspect of the very nature of the church. This is that the church has received, as part of its divine mandate, the call and capacity to multiply through non-identical reproductive processes. This view was sketched in *Mission-shaped Church*

¹⁰ A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988), p. 25.

pp. 93-96.¹¹ Seeing the church through the interpersonal paradigm, rather than the horticultural one, is naturally at one with the assertion that non-identical reproduction of the church is both diagnostic as well as normal. In the same way, all mothers know that their children are theirs but also that none of these children are them.



Such a view is theologically grounded in the diversity demonstrated in creation, and an understanding of the bipartite nature of the Incarnation – that is, the partnership between the Holy Spirit and Mary, and also that Jesus of Nazareth can be described as a fresh expression of God the Son. A process that sees the birth of fresh expressions of Church is congruent with this. Retaining a dominance of planting language hinders such perceptions about the necessity and normality of resultant diversity that comes through the non-identical reproduction of churches.

Missiologists have tended to reduce this factor to the need for engagement with context, or application of the translation principle in relation to the Gospel,¹² but they fail to express that it is also related to the very nature of the church as an interpersonal reproducing organism.

¹¹ This case was more fully argued in a PhD by G. Lings, *The calling and capacity of the Church to reproduce* (Manchester: 2009).

¹² An example is A. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), chapter 3: “The Translation Principle in Christian History”, pp. 26ff.

3. The interpersonal paradigm trumps the horticultural in highlighting the pastoral, social and human dimensions of the whole process of creating further churches.

It is inherently better at making these factors explicit. By use of its paradigm a significant set of phrases benefit by being changed: churches are born, rather than just planted; they are to mature, not just grow in size; and sadly some will die rather than simply close. Attention is properly drawn to what is occurring in the lives of those involved and this is an important riposte against any thinking in the wider church should it be dominated by economic thinking that can reduce goals to numbers and money, or which can write off church death as some sort of collateral damage.



The interpersonal also immediately opens up a wealth of useful family-based analogies such as dependency in infancy, development in childhood, challenges that occur at the teenage stage, the complexities of what is meant by being adult, and has scope for charity towards, and dignity conferred upon, churches that are in the evening of life. Through these analogies, the people in sending and sent churches have accessible models to understand the stages through which they may well go. The horticultural can offer very little of this. Fresh expressions of Church vocabulary, which easily allies with the interpersonal paradigm of church, helps take this young discipline beyond the various confines imposed, albeit unintentionally, by the previous planting metaphor.

4. Fresh expressions of Church language serves the wider Church of England better.

This is a somewhat utilitarian factor about how live debate on the contribution of new churches (to use a neutral term) is to be continued best within the Church of England, and within other English denominations too. There is no united, settled, well nuanced view, but it may be fair to

state that it is almost only those already in favour of the earlier language of church planting who continue to use it generically. Those who come anew to the phenomena of further young churches tend much more to use the fresh expressions of Church vocabulary. Unhelpfully, this divide can be so polarised, on either side, that it is possible to find people presenting the two as fundamentally different and completely separate from one another. The latter view is not the understanding behind this paper.

Despite this adversarial view, the contention here is that across the Church of England as a whole, referring to the phenomenon of new churches as fresh expressions of Church is to be preferred for various reasons. It is seen as a wider set of types of church than was true of church plants. It includes the two most common, and best-known new beginnings, Messy Church and café church, neither of which look very much like the traditional church plant. It is seen to travel better across the theological traditions,¹³ as less resource hungry than the large church plant and as more within the reach of the average parish. It therefore offers a wider set of choices in mission to a wider section of the Church. While not free of censure for being too ecclesial by John Hull, and insufficiently ecclesial by Davison and Milbank,¹⁴ the term has not attracted the fears linked to some past plants. Pragmatically, it is of wider use in the existing Church of England. Other denominations who are partners in the ecumenical Fresh Expressions team are finding something similar.

The term “fresh expressions of Church” offers a wider set of choices in mission to a wider section of the Church.

Evaluating the horticultural models in Scripture

One riposte to all this is that those advancing the priority of church planting language argue that the analogy has strong biblical roots, making the image almost non-negotiable. One cited instance is 1 Corinthians 3.6 which states that

¹³ The Church Army research has shown its wide use by the Central tradition and adoption in part by all traditions.

¹⁴ J. M. Hull, *Mission-shaped Church: A Theological Response* (Norwich: SCM, 2006) and A. Davison and A. Milbank *For the Parish* (Norwich: SCM, 2010).

Paul planted the seed, while Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. More widely, it is undeniable that Jesus used many horticultural images in his teaching and many are linked to the advance of the kingdom. But the 1 Corinthians passage is not such strong grounds as has been supposed. The reference to "planting" is back to how the Corinthians came to believe (1 Corinthians 3.5). It is by no means certain that the term planting refers to the self-conscious beginning of a church; rather, in context it refers to the early stage of communication of the gospel. Furthermore Paul, only four verses later, uses another analogy for the young Christians of a building, and the subsequent verses show him making much more use of that analogy, including calling the Christians a temple in verses 16-17.

We may be living in such a time by which the virtues brought by the horticultural are now being superseded by the greater gifts of the interpersonal, which is better at connecting Trinity, Humanity and Ecclesiology.

Thus at best his use of "planting" is but a passing allusion and the essential points being made there are firstly the rebuttal of whether Paul or Apollos were more important, for God gave the growth, and secondly, how the readers of the epistle are carrying on from what was started. As is common in the New Testament, we encounter a riot of images that cascade over one another; we search in vain for one image or metaphor that is permanently mandatory or exclusive. Bishop Steven Croft, speaking on this passage, at the *Evidence to Action* conference on 4th December, 2014, showed how, in this chapter, Paul draws on three metaphors about the church: parenthood, farming and building.

In regard to the Church, Paul Minear argued there are some 96 images in the New Testament, but importantly in his view four of them are controlling ones: the People of God, the New Creation, the Fellowship of Faith, and the Body of Christ.¹⁵ It is notable that these are dominantly interpersonal rather than horticultural. The task of theology is to try to humbly sift through the image-rich language in Scripture, which is seldom systematic, and seek to use terms that

¹⁵ P. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 268.

best honour the dynamics beneath them. In the past, debates about Christology and Trinity dominated that process. In our day it is happening more with ecclesiology and it has been noticing the starting of new communities that both look like and unlike the churches that have prompted them.

Other claims of planting language evaluated

The assertion that church planting is more adventurous in crossing boundaries and thus should be preferred now looks less compelling in the light of recent statistical data. Church Army's Research Unit has examined all examples in over a quarter of the Church of England dioceses and all of them contain some measure of traditional church plants. One third of these have crossed an ecclesial boundary for good reason, but we now also know that 42% of youth congregations do this, and around 70% of Network churches, Clusters (aka Missional communities) and New Monastic communities. Other kinds of fresh expressions of Church do this less than traditional church plants, but on average it is true of 25% of all cases. Church plants are not privileged in this regard.

The argument from the wide usage of the term "planting" has its limits too. Popularity of a term is no guarantee of its veracity. In the history of the church, there have been important language changes and these are often related both to periods of reform and to changes in paradigm. We may be living in such a time by which the virtues brought by the horticultural are now being superseded by the greater gifts of the interpersonal, which is better at connecting Trinity, Humanity and Ecclesiology.

Fresh expressions of Church is a term free of the horticultural limitations, and the words "fresh" and "expression" both introduce the teachable reader to the notions of something being both like and unlike past Church – exactly what the non-identical reproductive nature of the Church teaches, and which the interpersonal paradigm naturally works with.

Perhaps it is time for all of us who have truly gained from the planting term to concede that all gains carry future limits and now these are being reached. Equally those who have grown up on fresh expressions of Church language are wise to be humble against the time when their successors can delineate what would be better and why. It is always prudent that in such a time there should be a process of reception in the wider church, and thus it is unsurprising that the jury should still be out.

Diagram 1: The 2 are asserted to be essentially different



Taking the discussion forward

There are various possible relationships between the two terms, which can be made visual through using Venn diagrams, by which the two approaches might be represented as two circles and the questions become whether or not they overlap, and if they do, to what extent. Moreover, is there evidence to suggest which one is better understood as encircling the other?

Are they really separate?

Page five mentioned that there are some who see the relationship as represented by Diagram 1 (above).

Reasons to reject that assertion include their historical linkage, the similarity of their aims and theological identity, the treatment of both together in the report *Mission-shaped Church* and that such a position closes the conversation between the two views.

In that conversation between proponents of the two sets of language, one helpful foundation in exploring the connections and assessing the differences will be the positive valuing of both terms by both parties. There are essential things they share which creates an overlap, as exhibited by Diagram 2 (below).

Both terms include the important word “church” and both parties agree that whichever language is used, it is further churches that are coming into existence. In addition the word “planting” and the phrase “fresh expression” both hint at missional processes occurring. It has also been the case that the teaching around both disciplines underscores the necessity of contextual missional engagement. This suggests theologically speaking they have a similar core identity and thus there must be some considerable degree of overlap, though this assertion does not establish the extent.

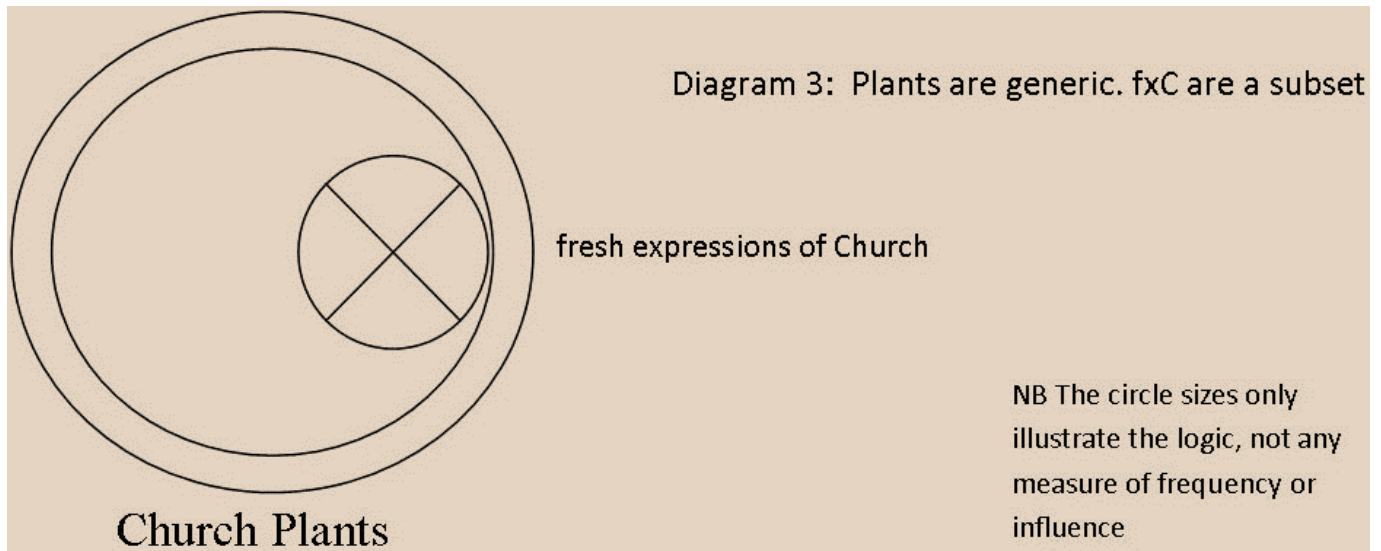
Exploring overlaps and differences

Further questions, which are not fanciful, can then be posed. When is a church plant not a fresh expression of Church, and vice versa? Where in practice are the overlaps and the differences? In this it is necessary to distinguish between markers of different identity and what are better understood as indicators of maturity. Thus comparing them simply by different numerical size or human and financial resources is not necessarily diagnostic, because it may merely indicate different speeds of development. In addition, in this process of comparison, both sides should also avoid citing bad practice of either as being typical, although these errors can be learnt from.

Diagram 2: The 2 are agreed to overlap



It is open whether there are CP that are not fxC and vice versa



When is a church plant not a fresh expression of Church?

Diagram 3 (above) illustrates both the assertion that church plants are the generic term and fresh expressions of Church are a subset, and that there are vital missional or ecclesial aspects of church plants that are not present in the fresh expressions of Church.

Variety within church plants themselves

At the start one must recognise there is not one precise model of a church plant. For example, some church plants are large in size - transplants in particular tend to be well resourced in people and money - and almost immediately this kind exhibit classic marks of ecclesial maturity, such as having a church building, possessing an ordained leader who in turn is facilitating use of the sacraments, they are covering their costs and they have independent governing processes. They put on public worship, often not very different from that of their sending church. They also grow in numbers and acquire other staff with some rapidity.¹⁶ Yet even these church plants are varied in size and resources.¹⁷

¹⁶ Overall data on this is sketchy. Out of the first 15 plants from Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), eight were large, involving sending around 50 or more people.

¹⁷ This was apparent even twelve years ago in a study of the first 15 church plants sent out in the HTB family of churches. It demonstrated that the various myths - of them all being transplants, moving Christians into the new area, being only about networks and being culturally homogeneous - were all unfounded. G. Lings, *Encounters on the Edge No. 15: Dynasty or Diversity?* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2002).

One indicator of variety is factors about location and size of operation. Church Army's research from 2012 onwards, into ¼ of the English dioceses, has thus far yielded 66 examples of church plants. Their average adult congregation size now is 65, varying from 300 to under 10 people. 24, or 36% of them, took 20 or more people on the team to begin them. Nearly 2/5th of them only took 3-12 people. A bit under 1/3 of them worship in a church building. So it can be seen that choice of venue, size of team and resultant size are simply variables within being church plants, not indicators of different types. The varying types of fresh expressions of Church also vary across these variables of size and team so none of these factors clearly differentiate the two.

Differences in maturing rates across all kinds of young church

The Church Army research has always examined elements that make for both the identity of, and the potential for maturity in, all the kinds of fresh expressions of Church (fxC).¹⁸ Such factors include these four: working for growth in discipleship, aspiration for and practical steps towards three-self identity (self-financing, self-governing, self-reproducing), drawing upon word and sacrament, and having recognised leaders. It then turns out that this set of markers only produces discernible differences between church plants and other fxC which are relative rather than absolute.

¹⁸ These are evidenced in the team's ten criteria for inclusion in the study and in their questionnaire.

It is the case that church plants do score more highly than most other fxC types in taking steps towards three-self identity, and they score highest of all types in already having the practice of both sacraments. Church Army's Research Unit think these differences reflect that most of them have been in existence longer and more often have ordained leaders. However, in regard to taking steps forward in making disciples, though they score well, it is no better than at least five other types of fxC.

Distinguishing features of church plants

It is more noticeable that they have an unusual profile in who leads them. 83.5% of them are male-led, in contrast to the average whereby 48% of fxC are male-led. 72% of the plants have ordained leaders compared to 48% of fxC, and 74% have full-time leaders again as opposed to 49% of the fxC. The data from tables of the most common kinds of fxC makes these features look like church plant distinctives as they top the lists.

Another factor - that looks diagnostic of church plants - is the results of when the leaders were asked what their motives were to start the plant. Of all the 20 types, the church plants scored far lowest on the two cultural factors: providing increased diversity, and connecting with unreached people groups. By stark contrast, they score highest of all types on being provided for an area of the parish not being reached, or a response to new housing. They are also all but highest on a response to the existing sending church being full. None of these responses are wrong, but they fit closely with a prior reputation that church plants tend to multiply needed examples for particular areas, but not to embody much diversity from their sending church, other than a more informal worship style.¹⁹

Other alleged differences assessed

One particular argument by planters, that church plants are fundamentally different from "fresh expressions" of Church precisely because their worship is like that of the parent body - and by that measure cannot be "fresh" because it has been seen before - is spurious.

¹⁹ This was noted in studies of a precedent set by examples in Chester-le-Street from 1971 to 1984. See G. Lings, *Encounters on the Edge No. 9: Leading Lights* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2001), pp. 5-15.

The word "fresh" has never meant novel, as is clear if applied to a cup of tea or a glass of orange juice. The point about "fresh" is that it brings life and is suitable for that context, which turns out to be exactly what the leaders of these church plants would argue for the choice of worship they have made. Some of the fresh expressions of Church, which the Church Army research has registered, rightly and deliberately choose traditional forms of worship as the right way forward - and thus fresh - for the context to which they went.



This argument is reversed by some radicals who accuse church planting of "cloning" the DNA of their sending church. If that were truly correct and they were identical in all respects to their sending church, this would count as falling outside the circle of fresh expressions of Church with their instincts and discipline for contextual diversity. However, as soon as another venue is used and there are different groups of people in both, while similarity is very possible, being identical is not, and the argument in its pure form fails. In looser form, the charge of intended replication, rather than reproduction, has more substance and by that parameter there could

be particular plants which in this sense are not "fresh", as any missional intent is not followed through by contextual application.

Some argue a different case: that church plants are different from fresh expressions of Church because they are inherently more effective in mission. Evidence is also emerging from the Church Army research that most kinds of fresh expression of Church, here including church plants, have some sort of natural unit size. In addition, the longer they exist, it seems the more difficult they find it to attract more non-churched people and then tend to grow by transfer. This latter feature need not be negative, for it includes existing Christians moving into an area who rightly are looking for a church to join. That said, we begin to see in our research that it is the church plants which are among the kinds of young church that have a measurably higher proportion of existing Christians. It is not yet clear whether this is because they have been in existence longer; we will need more examples over time and from other dioceses to test this.

Distinct yes, but not essentially different?

The inference from all the comparisons above is it is very hard to find an essential missional or ecclesial characteristic of church plants that is not found in good fresh expressions of Church practice, although in the latter it may be taking longer for those dynamics to fully develop. This is not to deny that church plants do have particular features not exhibited by all other kinds, but these are of degree, not of absolute distinction. This evidence shows there is variety within the plants themselves. There are also relative strengths they display, and perhaps especially diagnostic features in regard to who leads them and the motives that led to them being started. However, all of these features do occur in the other kinds of fxC and the differences indicate progress in developmental stages, not the forging of a different identity that would place them outside the circle that encloses all kinds of fresh expressions of Church.

When is a fresh expression of Church not a church plant?

Confusion surrounding the fresh expressions term

The waters of this question have been significantly muddied by the wide misapplication of the term "fresh expression". It has been very unhelpful that the words "of church" are often dropped from the label which has contributed to this confusion. The Church Army research has

worked to apply it as meant in *Mission-shaped Church*. By these 10 criteria used to test for it, 55% of all the 1,000+ cases across the first 11 dioceses had to be rejected.

The most common reason for exclusion was that what was examined turned out to be the start of valid mission projects in order to bring new people to the existing church. As missional they were commendable, but clearly they were not seen as ecclesial. More reprehensible was the blatant re-badging of existing work, some of which were fanciful in the extreme, like the new church notice board in a western country diocese and the annual tree lighting service in a northern one. This latter practice has brought the term "fresh expression" into some disrepute. However, there is a Reformation tag – "the abuse does not take away the use" – and there is some hope that the research work is restoring clarity and integrity to the term. It is therefore freely admitted that many alleged cases, where the term is misapplied or misunderstood, themselves stand outside both circles of being either church plants or fresh expressions of Church. Some are unhealthy inward facing expressions of Church, and some are a fresh expression of mission.

It is very hard to find an essential missional or ecclesial characteristic of church plants that is not found in good fresh expressions of Church practice.

Another complication is that *Mission-shaped Church* itself introduced a variant in the use of the new term it believed it coined. It suggested fresh expressions of Church language could be applied to the wholesale re-imagining of an existing local church, such as the shift from being congregation-based to being cell-based or working through missional communities. Ten years on, the latter is a little more common and Church Army have met at least one example in most of the dioceses surveyed this far. The questions are properly raised whether this is planting and is it churches that are thereby planted? Our team have had to face this as a live issue and in applying our criteria for what counts, some missional communities have demonstrated to us that they qualify as ecclesial, as well as missional, while others clearly see themselves as mission units but nothing more, and have therefore not been included. So far this complication has not derailed the process or been impossible to work with. It is also meaningful to talk about "planting" such

missional communities. There is a start-up process, including some sense of leaving the mother congregation and creating what used not to exist; that is a multiplication of units of the church.

It was necessary to examine this complication and also to assert that bogus cases should be rightly excluded, but now the direct question can be posed. Are there differences in fxC from church plants that are more diagnostic, suggesting that the variety in the width of kinds of fxC means that some of them fall outside the church planting model? If so, then this infers that "fresh expressions of Church" is the generic term, as shown in Diagram 4 (below).

Factors exhibited among fxC suggesting it is the more generic term

The following elements suggest this is plausible.

The *missional* processes by which they come into existence are more varied, some starting with community engagement, and distinctly waiting for the emergence of the next stage, rather than starting by putting on public worship. Another missional difference is that, some fxC, but only a sizeable minority, are focused on niches of society, or stages of life, while most share with the church plants that they are for all ages. Such specialism is very rare in church plants.

The genre also contains examples of very different dynamics of *communal* participation, caused partly by use of smaller unit church models such as the cell, or clusters/missional communities or of New Monastic communities, rather than of those of congregational life.

In addition, the fresh expressions of Church demonstrate greater diversity of *worship style*, from the more traditional directive front-led style (more like plants) to the distinctly laissez-faire approach of alternative worship and some café churches, or the overall breadth of learning utilised by Messy Churches.

Thus it has become clear over the years, from visits and questionnaires leading to analysis, that there are significant differences across the 20 types of fresh expression of Church. These occur in relation to a width of factors (and also the order in which they evolve): their missional processes, the emerging communal church life and then its resultant Christian worship. The variety across fxC, in these three key elements of church identity, demonstrate that it defies them being classified as any one distinct model, let alone as congregational church plants as normally practised.

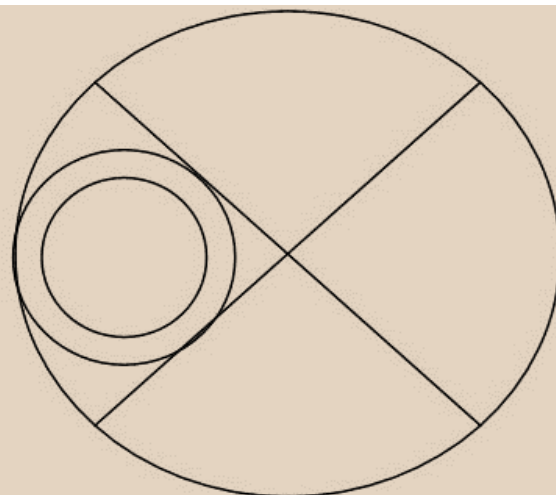
None of this is to say that church planting or fresh expressions of Church at their best are more missional or more ecclesial; it is simply to explain the reasons for thinking that the two terms are inherently different.

An analogy of the difference in the terms

The sheer variety, and intentional diversity, within the term "fresh expressions of Church" indicates it is more like the use of the word "animal"; it is a word that distinguishes them say from insects, but does not indicate any particular animal. They have commonalities in that fresh expressions of Church are missional, but the missional starting points are diverse; they are church, but the ways in which that identity is manifested is being re-imagined widely.

Diagram 4: fxC are generic. Plants are a subset

Church Plants



fresh expressions of Church

NB The circle sizes only illustrate the logic, not any measure of frequency or influence.

By contrast, the greater similarity of church plants suggests this term is more like the word “dog”. There is some variety in the latter, covering breed, size, colour and even habitat, but there are other animals that are different to dogs. The Church Army research has had to deal with no less than 20 recognisable kinds of fresh expressions of Church. Some of these would robustly deny they are other kinds of fresh expression of Church, including that they understand themselves to be different from traditional church plants.



Plants or planting?

Coming to clarity, let alone agreement, about which way round the generic choice is made, is further complicated in that a distinction is properly made between the noun “church plant” and the verb “to church plant” and its activity: church planting. One way to understand this difference is that with the noun it is more possible to make a credible list of what it is likely to be characterised by. For example, one diagnostic feature would be that it is church practiced as congregation.

However, the verb can be used more freely and thus could more easily embrace other sizes and kinds of church, such as cells or missional

communities. The verb can be used more flexibly and it is closer to the breadth indicated by the fresh expressions of Church term which has never been one model. In practice it is church plants that are seen and come to mind, so the contrast has been made with them. But even the verb “planting” is subject to the horticultural limits delineated in this examination.

Conclusion

This issue of *Snapshots* has examined the arguments put by both sides. It has argued that while there are variants in church plants, they are more alike than unlike, and that their characteristics are echoed in other types of fresh expression of Church. It will then be good to honour church plants as one subset within fresh expressions of Church, rather than the other way around, although this conclusion challenges past perceptions and may not be easy for its proponents to receive.

Thank God for what planting has helped

None of what is written is to deny there are valuable lessons to learn from best planting practice. At best we have seen the modelling of steady sacrificial giving away of their best resources by the sending churches. They have historically shown the way in the multiplying of more churches and alerted the Church of England to gaps in its missional cover despite its parish system.

They have been the seedbed from which further developments have come and without their lead it is hard to see how the current fresh expressions of Church movement could have flourished. Not least in their contribution has been that as those planted churches have matured, some of them in turn have continued to plant again. For this to be in the DNA of all churches is a precious and timely gift.

It looks like time to move on

Examination of the kind of variety on the ground shows “fresh expressions of Church” is the more generic term. Within the Church of England there is an evolving history of a shift beyond the language and past practice of church plants. In this denomination and other historic ones, the fxC vocabulary appears more used, useful and flexible.

It has also, and perhaps most importantly, been shown to be theologically more appropriate when linked to the interpersonal paradigm of Church which itself works naturally with an understanding of the diversity of churches that results from their non-identical reproduction. This interpersonal view of fresh expressions of Church, as young churches, is pastorally more acute than the horticultural can provide, and closer in language to the reality of human communities that make up such churches.

This is the paradigm shift of language and thus of perception that is occurring under our feet. It may be wisdom to notice this and embrace it for the gains it offers in our thinking about the identity and future of young churches in what I would rather call the *mixed ecology* of a denomination.

This shift will recalibrate our expectations; it will coin further human and family-based analogies. It will help us to rejoice in church births and to mourn church deaths. It will make maturity and sustainability more central to the whole discipline of aiding church birth and seeing what is born grow up in Christ.

George W Lings
Feast of All Souls
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